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Rhetoric of Malcolm Gladwell’s *Outliers*

Section I: Introduction and Content

Hardworking. Persistent. Determined. These are all adjectives the United States associates with successful people. Whenever a story is told about someone who has risen through the ranks to become a successful person~~--~~an Outlier~~--~~ that achievement is usually said to be earned through personal means and a tremendous amount of effort. Gladwell’s book takes this success stereotype and conducts an examination of the way the world views an Outlier. *Outliers: the Story of Success* is an unusual nonfiction book in that it is not only easy to understand, but also well written and interesting. Gladwell engages and persuades the reader using not only research, but also real-life examples and anecdotes to prove his point. *Outliers* demonstrates the point that it is impossible for a successful person to become an outlier solely by his or her own merit. There are a number of uncontrollable factors, such as birth date, ethnicity, culture, upbringing, and surroundings that all influence a person’s success. *Outliers* proves that even the best of us require assistance to reach the top.

 Section II: The Author’s Background

The author of this book, Malcolm Gladwell, has written two other nonfiction books and numerous articles for big city newspapers. His previous books, *The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference* and *Blink: the Power of Thinking without Thinking,* were number one on the *New York Times* Best Sellers List. It’s obvious that Gladwell writes about subjects that really catch the reader’s attention.  In fact, 1.3 million copies of *Blink* in more than twenty-five different languages have been printed since the book’s release. *The Tipping Point* outdoes Gladwell’s newer books with 1.7 million copies in print to date (*The New York Times*). People enjoy Gladwell’s style of writing and his ideas. Recently, he has spoken at West Point, the National Institutes of Health, and several other highly regarded businesses and organizations. His massive popularity became apparent when he was voted one of *Time Magazine*’s 100 Most Influential People in 2005 (Gladwell.com). Currently, Gladwell is a staff writer of the *New York Times*, and has also previously written for the *Washington Post* (Gladwell.com).  He has been a finalist and won the National Magazine Award for his writing (The New Yorker).

His prestigious jobs, awards, and evident popularity with readers shows that Gladwell clearly knows about writing. However, is Gladwell really qualified to write on the topics of sociology, psychology, business, and science that are discussed in *Outliers*? No, not in my opinion. Besides a stint as a reporter on business and science for the *Washington Post*, Gladwell has hardly any experience or knowledge when it comes to the topics he discusses in his books. Malcolm Gladwell has never been a sociologist, psychologist, businessman, or scientist. He has only been a writer. He graduated from the University of Toronto, Trinity College with a degree in history, so even in his college days, Gladwell had never had a tremendous amount of familiarity with the topics he feels he is qualified to write about (Gladwell.com). With his lack of know-how in these fields, why does the author feel he is practiced enough to discuss these topics in his books? He has no authority or experience, but like all other writers, Gladwell writes about topics, issues, and stories he finds interesting. He does his research accurately, and finds a variety of different and interesting subjects upon which to base his books. In an interview, the *New York Times* stated that Gladwell is “omnivorous in his interests and brilliantly attuned to every level of today’s conversation,” which are two big reasons why he is “one of the most inventive journalists now writing (Donadio).”

Section III: The Book’s Argument

            In Outliers, Malcolm Gladwell argues that one person cannot be successful all by himself. It takes many other, uncontrollable aspects (that often happen by chance) for that person to reach the top of his field. Gladwell uses a combination of research and anecdotes in order to clearly convey his point to his audience. His familiar and informal style of writing suggests that he and the reader are good buddies, appealing to pathos to help the reader relate to Gladwell and see his point of view. This laid-back type of writing also appeals to the average reader: it not only makes the book easier to understand, unlike more scholarly nonfiction books on the market, but also makes the reader more interested in the topic because he doesn’t have to slog through all the academic lingo found in other nonfiction works. For example, the author talks specifically to the reader when saying, “Over the course of the chapters ahead, I’m going to introduce you to one kind of outlier after another,” and “We’re going to uncover the secrets of a remarkable lawyer (Gladwell 17) .” This type of rhetorical strategy, conversing with the audience on a comfortable and familiar level, helps engage the reader’s attention and keep his or her interest throughout the book.

            Malcolm Gladwell also uses a variety of different stories to persuade his audience. These anecdotes provide real-life examples of evidence of his theory, while still capturing the reader’s attention. There are narratives on a variety of different subjects, from major league Canadian hockey to Bill Gates the computer genius. Gladwell’s diversity of stories shows his audience that his theory holds true not just in one case, but in many unrelated circumstances as well. In the Epilogue of *Outliers*, Gladwell includes a story about his own family’s rise to success to tie his book together. In an appeal to pathos, he discusses how his mother rose from Jamaican poverty to become a successful person in Gladwell’s life. The author clearly admires his grandmother, Daisy, for providing his mother with a chance at success, and this particular story illustrates his thesis to the audience on a more personal and sentimental level than the other narratives (Gladwell 270). Another of the author’s rhetorical strategies is the use of sound facts found through research. In Chapter One of *Outliers*, Gladwell appeals to logos by including a chart of the birthdates for the 2007 Medicine Hat Tigers, a major league Canadian hockey team (Gladwell 20). He also includes a list of where the last twenty-five Americans to win the Nobel Prize attended college in Chapter Three (Gladwell 81), as well as chart listing the seventy-five richest people throughout history in Chapter Two (Gladwell 56). This appeal to logos gives the reader solid facts to analyze, and makes *Outliers* a much more convincing read.

*Outliers: the Story of Success* is outlined in a very understandable way. Instead of going in order of date which the events he discusses occurred, Gladwell organizes his book by topic. In each section and chapter of the book, a different circumstance of uncontrollable fortune is analyzed for the reader. For example, birth date, practice time, upbringing, and parental teachings are all discussed in Part One of *Outliers*, Opportunity. In Part Two: Legacy, Gladwell brings up the topics of culture, history, and ethnicity as factors that influence success. The context of Gladwell’s book is organized in a simple, understated way to allow the reader a maximum understanding of the information Gladwell presents. On a smaller note, Gladwell employs rhetorical questions and a high use of italics to some of his stronger opinions that has a better chance of swaying the reader to his point of view. These tricks are used as if in order to make the reader double-take and be especially aware of Gladwell’s strong opinions.

Section IV: Opposing Points of View

            Although *Outliers* is a highly acclaimed book, it also has several criticisms. One problem I found with Gladwell’s book is that he fails to explicitly define the term “success.” Success is a subjective term, and has different meanings according to different types of people. Success can mean happiness, wealth, popularity, or power, depending on who you are and what you want out of life. The reader must assume that Gladwell is talking about success in terms of being the best from reading examples that include the likes of Bill Gates, Bill Joy, and Joe Flom—all experts in their field. However, the fact remains that Gladwell only discusses one type of success in his book; a type of success which does not appeal to everyone. In fact, one reporter for the *Seattle Times* agrees, and says “Gladwell never confronts the fact that success is defined differently in different cultures” (Gwinn).

Another complaint many critics have of *Outliers* is that Gladwell only provides extreme circumstances for the narratives told in the book. All the examples the author provides suspiciously adhere to his opinions, and none of these anecdotes sway even slightly from his thesis. Gladwell probably chose these specific examples expressly for that purpose: to further convince his readers of the idea that not one single person has ever achieved success by himself. In one chapter of *Outliers*, Gladwell gives the example of the Beatles as proof that “outliers in a particular field reached their lofty status through a combination of ability, opportunity, and utterly arbitrary advantage (Gladwell 37).” According to the author, the Beatles achieved 10,000 hours of band practice by playing for eight-hours a night at a club in Hamburg. This enormous amount of practice therefore caused the Beatles to be a better band than any other group around, and catapulted them into becoming possibly the greatest band in history (Gladwell 47). This success story is named by one critic from the *New York Times* as being “selective in the extreme (Kakutani).” The reporter memorably remarks that “Mr. Gladwell does not explain why other groups who practiced as much as the Beatles like the [Rolling Stones](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/organizations/r/rolling_stones/index.html?inline=nyt-org) or the [Beach Boys](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/organizations/b/the_beach_boys/index.html?inline=nyt-org), who also went on to shape music history (Kakutani). “

Finally, the last main criticism others have of Gladwell’s book is that it does not provide a particularly convincing argument. Many critics believe that, while *Outliers* is an entertaining and thought-provoking read, it fails to convince the reader of Gladwell’s main point. One reporter of the *Seattle Times* agreed by stating “Outliers is a smoothly written, fascinating but not entirely persuasive essay (Gwinn).” This opinion is generated by beliefs that Gladwell provides too many amusing and irrelevant stories and does not include enough proven data and statistical information. One critic goes so far as to say that the author attempts to establish his thesis by insinuating evidence from his research that isn’t really there. The *New York Times* reporter suggests that Gladwell’s hypothesis “[relies] heavily on suggestion and innuendo (Kakutani).” While most people agree that *Outliers* is a fun read for the most part, they are not necessarily convinced of his ideas and opinions. They believe that in order for Gladwell’s book to be completely believable, the author would have to provide more evidence and an even more thorough explanation of his research.

Section V: Conclusion

In my opinion, Gladwell does a decent job persuading his audience that success is made through uncontrollable factors of circumstance. His use of pathos and logos strengthened his rhetorical strategies, and a combination of hard data and “colorful anecdotes” made *Outliers* not only informative, but also interesting. Personally, I agree with Gladwell and found the topic extremely fascinating. Because of all the factors that contribute to the personality, knowledge, and skill level a person has, it is entirely believable that those factors contribute to success as well. Although critics claim that Outliers is oversimplified and unconvincing, it has been a huge success worldwide for people interested in learning more about the Story of Success. Malcolm Gladwell supplies *Outliers* with not only reliable facts and data, but also attention-grabbing stories and relevant findings to make the book into his very own Outlier.

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